

2.2 A Retail Development Strategy

2.2.1 Goal: A Specialty Shopping Destination

Downtown Blacksburg will become the New River Valley's most distinctive collection of specialty retail shops and one-of-a-kind restaurants.

2.2.2 Background

Downtown Blacksburg used to be the major retail center for the community. Like many communities, however, Blacksburg's standard retail gravitated to commercial corridors, shopping centers, and malls. For the town of Blacksburg, this meant that many retailers relocated out of town altogether to neighboring Christiansburg.

Retail in Blacksburg's downtown will not be able to recapture the "standard" retailers of its earlier days unless a major shift in retailing trends occurs. Unlike many communities, however, Blacksburg has been able to refocus its retail offerings, if only in a limited way, toward specialty retail. Maintaining and supporting this shift of focus will be critical to Blacksburg's retail future.

2.2.3 Assets/Opportunities

- Downtown Blacksburg has a "captive" retail audience with students at the university. The student retail consumer has disposable income that matches the offerings of many specialty retail shops. These same offerings could be appealing to a local consumer market.
- Downtown has a number of successful retail shops already in place. These shops, though scattered through downtown, have a variety of high-end retail goods and can form a base for future retail investment.
- Blacksburg has one of the largest concentrations of high-income households in the region making it an ideal location for high-end retail. This population base is enhanced by its diversity. People from a variety of backgrounds present opportunities for highly specialized retail.
- Blacksburg has a concentration of population close to downtown not present elsewhere in the region.
- Downtown is a unique place within the New River Valley.

2.2.4 Liabilities/Challenges

- Retailers in downtown Blacksburg sometimes get “lost in the shuffle” of the student oriented restaurants and nightspots.
- Parking is a problem for downtown retail merchants.
- The pedestrian environment is not conducive to specialty retail “browsing.”
- Retailers must compete in an increasingly sophisticated market.

2.2.5 Objectives

- A. Target specific retail opportunities to be pursued.
- B. Encourage the upgrading of buildings in the downtown to encourage higher-end retail.
- C. Develop a short and long term parking improvement strategy for downtown.
- D. Create opportunities for new retail space in downtown.
- E. Market downtown as a specialty retail destination.

2.2.6 Action Strategies

Demonstration Projects – 2001-2002

- *Conduct a concerted retail recruitment effort.* Retail recruitment is not easy and it is not a “part-time” job. It requires identifying specific retail market niches through a thorough retail market study, offering incentives and inducements for retail to locate downtown, having a thorough inventory of downtown spaces available for retail, and pursuing local business owners and entrepreneurs interested in retail operations. The Partnership for Blacksburg strategy presented in Chapter 6 identifies an entity that can handle detailed retail recruitment for Blacksburg.
- *Offer incentives for property owners to upgrade buildings.* There are both “carrot” and “stick” approaches to having buildings upgraded in a downtown environment. Each has its benefits but a “goodwill” campaign of incentives always creates less friction if implemented well. The following techniques have had good results in other communities:
 - *Façade grant program* – Free money will always be an inducement to make improvements. Mini-grant programs of \$5,000 or less can help property owners improve their

facades. Often, these are matching grant programs that help generate investment in downtown properties. The grantor can place restrictions on the design and even the types of businesses that the grantee may pursue.

- *Code assistance* – Dealing with code issues is often the most difficult thing for small property owners. A thoughtful “code inspection preview” service has been many communities’ answer to this problem. The codes department conducts a “walk through” with the property owner to identify issues and make recommendations. The walk through is recorded in a brief report to the property owner. This effort has helped save time and money when renovations begin.
- *Commercial code enforcement* – This is more a restrictive approach to improving properties. District-wide commercial code enforcement has been one way to have property owners improve properties that are a threat to the public safety.
- *Loan programs* – Low interest loan pools have been a long-used technique to encourage uses and renovations in downtown districts. These loan pools can be directed exclusively to retail businesses. Having a pool of money set aside for downtown development minimizes the risk that potential business owner might incur.
- *Design guidelines* – A final technique for improving downtown properties is mandatory design guidelines. Blacksburg already has voluntary guidelines in place. These have been effective to date. Mandatory design review has an incremental effect on downtown properties by requiring certain standards for renovations.
- *Develop a parking strategy.* Parking emerged as the number one issue with many of the stakeholders in the Master Plan process. Before large sums of money are spent on major new parking resources, a management strategy for existing parking facilities must be put in place. The parking situation in downtown Blacksburg is nothing short of a mess – students use customer spots, employees use customer spots, enforcement is lax, lots within mere blocks sit nearly empty at high demand times, private property owners vigorously defend their lots, and directions to public parking are weak at best. A parking strategy will involve many steps. The following outlines several suggestions for a thorough parking management strategy:



Figure 4: Downtown Logotype

- *Inventory of Spaces* – The town has already inventoried spaces in the downtown. There are 3576 total spaces in the downtown area of which 2057 are privately owned and 665 are public spaces either on street or in public lots. Virginia Tech has the balance of downtown spaces with 854 spaces in the downtown core.
- *Parking Summits* – Solving parking issues will not be easy. A series of up to three bi-monthly parking summits may need to be held to test ideas and garner feedback on implementation of the strategies.
- *Firm Enforcement* – A period of zero tolerance may be necessary to begin to discourage illegal use of customer parking spots by employees and those using university related facilities on campus.
- *Parking Signage* – The existing parking signs should be replaced immediately with brighter, clearer signing. “After hours” parking lots such as those at Town Hall should also be signed as such.
- *Parking Pamphlet* – Many communities use a parking pamphlet distributed at stores to show parking locations.
- *Designated Employee Lots* – A walk from Town Hall to College Avenue is less than five minutes. This lot could be dedicated to late night employees of downtown businesses to alleviate pressure for on-street spaces.
- *Work with Private Lot Owners* – Private lot owners should consider partnering with the Town on parking issues so that resources are maximized. Many communities work out creative lease arrangements with local governments to manage downtown parking in a more efficient manner.
- *Parking Management Authority/Contractor* – A creative solution to the parking issues may be to contract parking management to a private company that will negotiate leases, make sure parking lots are clean, and manage parking. This would be especially important during peak usage times in the downtown.

These solutions will not solve the parking problem entirely but will improve the situation while long-term plans are made for additional parking resources.

- *Create Community Identity – Logotype.* Figure 3 shows a potential logotype design for downtown Blacksburg. Having a unique identifier for downtown allows for all businesses to joint market their services in the context of downtown as a whole. This will unify the downtown under a single logo. We



Figure 5: Parking deck wrapped in residential development

recommend that this logo be different from that of the Town Government to separate the concept of downtown from the official function of town services.

- *Develop an Internal Marketing Campaign.* Once the logotype is established, using it on every marketing piece that relates to downtown will be critical. The ads in Exhibit 10 show some concepts for an internal marketing campaign for the community. These mock ads are designed to instill pride for downtown in Blacksburg citizens and residents of the surrounding area.

Next Steps – 2002 and Beyond

- *Build New Parking Resources.* Exhibit eleven depicts two new potential parking resources for downtown Blacksburg.
 - *Donaldson Brown Garage* – The first is a new facility to be located on the Parking Lot of the Donaldson Brown Conference Center. This site has been considered for such a structure for a number of years and it offers the single best opportunity to create a parking resource that will benefit both the University and the Downtown. A garage here could hold over 500 cars. With entrances on Draper and Otey Street, the garage would have ingress and egress directly adjacent to University Facilities and in the heart of downtown Blacksburg. The frontage of this lot along College Avenue could be ground floor retail with upper floor residential as shown in Figure 5.
 - *Progress Street Garage* – The second facility would be a parking garage on Progress Street. This lot would also have residential frontage that would be compatible with the adjacent neighborhood.
- *Develop Retail Catalysts and Retail In-fill.* New retail facilities will be needed in the downtown area. Exhibit 11 details where major retail might occur in the future. Of particular note is the illustration of retail space at the ground floor of the Donaldson Brown parking garage and along the Main street frontage adjacent to the Tech performing arts facility. These retail spaces should be privately leased from the partnership organization described in section 2.6 of this report.
- *Implement External Regional Marketing Campaign.* Examples of a regional marketing campaign are shown in Exhibit 12. Blacksburg to the New River Valley. This campaign would take what has traditionally been thought of as a detriment to downtown shopping and turn it into an asset – downtown as the “big box” alternative.

Exhibit 10: Ad Concepts
Designed to be marketed
within Blacksburg

[Click here to see Exhibit 10](#)

Exhibit 11: Plan illustrating future parking facilities with adjacent retail development

[Click here to see Exhibit 11](#)

Exhibit 12: Ad Samples to be
marketed in the New River
Valley Region

[Click here to see Exhibit 12](#)